

The University of Chicago

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE
OF THE PLÉIADE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES
AUGUST, 1939

By
ROBERT JOHN CLEMENTS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE
OF THE PLEISTOCENE

A FURTHER STUDY OF THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE
Pleistocene and the present
state of the world.



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NOTE: The thesis of which an abstract is subjoined was submitted to the University of Chicago in the summer of 1939. Shortly thereafter, portions were reproduced in Modern Philology, the PMLA Quarterly, and in the spring of 1942 the entire work was published in an expanded and more detailed form by the Harvard University Press. Since the editorial policies of that Press would not permit the volume to be identified as a Ph.D. dissertation and since the marketing policies understandably would not permit one hundred copies to be turned over to the University of Chicago for gratuitous distribution, the Chairman of the Department of Romance Languages and the Dissertation Secretary of the University of Chicago have agreed to follow an alternative practice and to distribute this abstract of the original dissertation. For more detailed treatment of the problems investigated, the reader is invited to examine either the dissertation on file in the University of Chicago Library or the later expanded volume published under the joint auspices of the Department of Romance Languages of Harvard University, the Modern Language Association of America, and the American Council of Learned Societies.

CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE PLÉIADE

Various studies have been published on the linguistic and stylistic reforms of the Pléiade poets. However, no single study devoted exclusively to their literary theory has yet been presented. Most of the existing discussions of this group are more concerned with the biographies, literary relationships, sources, and innovations of these poets than with their aesthetics. The Pléiade left no carefully articulated and formulated system of critical theory. The prefaces of Ronsard, Pontus de Tyard, Du Bellay, Peletier, and Sébilet afford only a fragmentary idea of their theory. Because of the scarcity of written aesthetic theory left by these poets, and since the position of the Pléiade in the history of criticism is a paramount one, it has seemed worth while to expand and fill in to a greater extent certain parts of an incomplete critical system scarcely approached by other scholars. There remains one way by which this process of filling in a basic poetics might be successfully carried on. This is by an analysis of the judgments and opinions of the Pléiade on other writers. The writings of the Pléiade are replete with references to other poets, orators, chroniclers, grammarians, and philosophers which constitute a valuable complement to present-day knowledge of the aesthetics of the Pléiade. Not only do these references and judgments help to clarify the sketchy ideas about nature against nurture, mimetic processes, poetic madness and divinity, and the like, which the prefaces and manifestoes presented, but they introduce new concepts and criteria entirely neglected in the manifestoes. These include such basic issues as truth and mendacity, sincerity and insincerity, clarity and obscurity, sweetness and utility, poetic glory and the revolt against the notion of glory. It is noteworthy that these became major criteria in practice, that is, in the criticisms and judgments which the Pléiade pronounced on other writers, even though they remained minor in written theory. It is our aim to demonstrate, by inducing principles from specific judgments, that these issues must be included in any hypothetical system of criticism which might be

set up for the Pléiade, to show how they were part of the literary tradition which the Pléiade inherited, to indicate the extent to which they were used, and lastly, to quote from the specific judgments themselves.

The poets to be studied under a broad acceptance of the term Pléiade include Ronsard, Du Bellay, Baif, Jodelle, Des Autels, La Péruse, Belleau, Dorat, Peletier, Pontus de Tyard, Héroet, Magny, Passerat, Tahureau, and Grévin. It is the actual poems of these men which will serve as the prima materia of our investigation. However, their written theory is kept constantly under consideration, and this prose is correlated with their poetry when the occasion demands. The opposition of theory preached and theory applied is another primary objective of this study. To avoid viewing the Pléiade as an isolated and unrelated phenomenon, we parallel some of their ideas not only with the critics of classical antiquity, but with other French and even neo-Latin writers of their epoch.

The principal criteria of facets of their aesthetics which gradually emerge from the wealth of criticisms in the Pléiade poetry are the following:

Chapter I	The Ethics of Poetry (truth and sincerity)
Chapter II	The Values of Poetry (glory and the revolt against glory)
Chapter III	The Communication of Poetry (clarity and obscurity)
Chapter IV	The Function of Poetry (sweetness and utility)
Chapter V	The Inspiration of Poetry (art and nature)

I

The authority of the ancients did not spare the "unbroken packages" of antiquity, the classics, from a censure which varied from implied charges of insincerity to outright charges of lying. The Pléiade's confusion or inconsistency about poetic truth led them to make extravagant accusations; this was particularly evident in their criticisms of the epicists. Their chief difficulty resulted from their inability to keep poetic truth away from the narrow precincts of historical truth and their failure to recognize completely the fictive privileges of the creative artist. Petrarchism was acknowledged by them as the archetype of literary untruth and dishonesty. Petrarch's statements were questioned more frequently than those of any other author, including Homer

and Plato. The many criticisms on Petrarch or Petrarchism have an ethical basis and show that Petrarchism had become synonymous with insincerity, with mellitae mendacia linguae.

It must be granted that, whereas any number of authors are blamed for deviating from truth, seldom is a writer praised for his veracity. Exceptions are Commynes and Guicciardini. Few charges of insincerity or mendacity were directed at the Pléiade's contemporaries by name, for the Pléiade members became discreet if not insincere themselves. Similarly they practiced and condemned flattery in the same breath. Economic necessity and ambition incited them to flatter not only the nobles, but also those writers who were favorites at court. Just as their indulgence in Petrarchism made them sensitive to its insincerity, so did their practice of flattery make them discountenance it in others. Their objections had an ethical and a moral basis. That is, not only did they find it personally distasteful, but they recognized all of its inherent vice for which the church had condemned it. These objections impelled the Pléiade to accept and apply a conservative canon of criticism which they never formulated, but which an inspection of their verse shows to be an integral part of their literary theory.

II

The Pléiade's formal adherence to the cult of glory was fostered by three traditions to which we may summarily give the Latin etiquettes: the exegi monumentum, the doctus poeta, and the odi profanum. The three may be recalled briefly in that order: Through his works the poet builds a glorious monument to himself, his friends, or his patrons. The creative writer is the wisest and most gifted member of his society, not only in literature, but in all the humanities. The poet or artist is a social individualist, living apart from the throng in spirit if not in body.

Like the theme of poetic glory itself, the reaction against glory was part of the ideological heritage of the Pléiade from the classic poets and from the Christian philosophers. Not mentioned in formal treatises by the Pléiade, this reaction has passed unnoticed by literary historians of that time as well as those of the present day. Its importance as a literary idea with

the Pléiade becomes apparent only from an examination of the remarks and judgments of this group on other writers. The revolt against the theme of glory showed three persuasions of the Pléiade: (1) Poetry gives the maker no divinity or immortality, as the experience of the past shows. (2) Lack of discrimination robs the poet of glory even during his lifetime. Society cannot distinguish good poets from bad, as the experiences of present-day poets show. (3) Poetry is a trade and, as such, profitless and foolish. Certainly, the events of their lives contributed indirectly toward this reaction against the Pindaric ideal, but save for the fact that complaints about literature were rare during the early 1550's, no immediate correlation may be made between their curricula vitae and the three facets of their revolt, nor can a mass progression toward pessimism be established.

III

The third criterion of judgment apparent from the poetry of the Pléiade concerns clarity and obscurity. In addition to the references in their poetry, two members of the Pléiade, Pontus de Tyard and Sébilet mention it in treatises. Two types of obscurity, conscious and unconscious, are mentioned. The Pléiade were as concerned about clarity as was the publicized reform of Malherbe, but with three differences. First was their endorsement of oracular obscurantism which Malherbe could only reject as sophistry and nonsense. Second, they were concerned with the ethical intention of the poet to be communicative and honest with his reader. Third, the doctus poeta convictions of the Pléiade and their disregard for the unschooled reader caused them to admire complexity and learned paraphrase. That they succeeded in becoming critical about obscurity could only result from a sort of psychomachy, for it meant overcoming two of their weaknesses, pedantry and exclusivity. Three stock criticisms were leveled at contemporaries who wrote unintelligibly; the second of these was the comment of Saint Jerome on Perius: (1) You are so incomprehensible that you don't understand yourself. (2) "Non vis intelligi nec ego te volo intelligere." (3) If you are so desirous of not being understood, then you have only to cease writing.

IV

This chapter attempts to determine the several meanings of the concept of sweetness, and secondarily of utility, as used by the Pléiade in their critical observations. After weighing the Pléiade's exposition on and translation of the utile and dulce, one finds them believing in the Peripatetic and Horatian doctrine that literature must have utilitarian as well as hedonistic purpose, even though the poetry the Pléiade wrote seemed designed to lighten rather than enlighten. Because of this belief, they invented the epithet "utiledoux," considered a consummate compliment. The revival of the Pindaric ode and the seriousness with which the Pléiade took the trade of letters caused a frequent opposition of sweetness and gravity. Although generally gravity implied sublimity and solemnity of tone, in this contrast it came to mean also solemnity of purpose, just as sweetness meant hedonistic purpose.

Ruminating on sweetness, the inventive and imaginative Pléiade created three new images of poetic imitation, one from each of the three poetic motifs of sweetness: (1) The Renaissance writer composes best with the quills plucked from the sweet-singing Swans of antiquity. (2) Like a bee, the Renaissance writer culls the sweet gardens of the past. (3) The Renaissance writer distills ever sweeter styles in the poetic alembic out of the prima materia of past writings. The importance of these three motifs is evident from the frequency of their appearance throughout the production of the Pléiade.

V

In trying to determine whether the Pléiade school was more inclined toward nature or art as the crucial element of inspiration, one is confronted with three categories of information, different and dissident. They may be classed as follows: Pro Natura: the varied imagery of inspiration describing how poets are given the bounty of genius by divine or mechanical intervention, imagery found in various poems and in tributes to writers of genius. Pro Arte: the counsel regarding composition and style found in the Pléiade's few texts of instruction and in personal

epistles. Aurea Mediocritas: the prose treatises which attempt a compromise between the two extreme viewpoints.

The fact that the Pléiade found the imagery of inspiration, divinity, and predestination--Muses, demons, corybantic fury, astromancy--in the classic writers with whom they were familiar inclined them somewhat toward a belief in nature over art. All these images were more than meaningless conceits: they possessed a definite literary and critical meaning and indicated a personal persuasion. The Pléiade's own contributions to this imagery, like their variations upon the tropes of sweetness, were considerable and in some cases most original.

Despite the obvious contradictions and compromises which might be taxed against the partisans of nature, their position was the one which remained most popular. It was to remain the predominant viewpoint until the eighteenth century was to re-define the issue as a choice between enthusiasm and verve, on the one hand, and reason and taste, on the other, with the latter elements overbalancing the former.

There were a great many reserves and compromises occasioned by the knowledge of the Pléiade that poetry was hard work, that poetry was a profession, that poetry demanded both a humanistic and prosodic education. However, their Hellenism, their imagination, and their egotism inclined them to set genius over art. And their remarks and criticisms on other writers reveal that this inclination was even more pronounced than their theoretical treatises indicated.

